

House of Lords supports human embryonic stem cell research

Susan Mayor *London*

Members of the House of Lords—Britain's second parliamentary chamber—have supported government proposals to permit research using human embryonic stem cells, during a debate which many had thought would go against the recommendations.

Peers voted in favour of proposals approved by MPs in the House of Commons last month to change the Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Research Purposes) Regulations and rejected a delaying amendment by 212 votes to 92—an unexpectedly large majority of 120.

Under the current regulations, embryos up to 14 days old can be used only for very narrowly defined research purposes, relating mainly to reproduction. If the new regulations become law, they would allow the regulatory body for this area—the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority—to license a wider range of research, including the development of new treatment approaches to serious medical conditions such as Parkinson's disease.

Many peers felt that the

proposed changes in the regulations were being rushed through parliament and should be left unchanged until they had been fully considered by a Lords committee. There was particular concern about the ethical implications of stem cell research on embryos produced by cloning.

Cross bench peer Lord Alton had tabled an amendment calling for the issue to be considered by a select committee. He said: "It's precisely because we need to consider these things in detail that we shouldn't be stampeded into making decisions by 31 January."

The proposed delay was supported by religious leaders, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Roman Catholic church in England and Wales, the Chief Rabbi, and the President of the Muslim College.

In a passionate debate Lord Alton questioned the morality of treating the human embryo as "just another accessory to be created, bartered, frozen, or destroyed." He argued: "These



Protesters against cloning (pictured in Nice in December) lost a battle this week when the House of Lords voted in favour of it

are not trivial questions that preoccupy a few moral theologians. They are at the heart of our humanity."

However, supporters of the new regulations argued that delaying research could harm people with genetic diseases. Junior health minister Lord Hunt of Kings Heath reassured peers that there were no circumstances under which human

cloning could take place in the United Kingdom, saying "there is no slippery slope here."

He continued: "The human embryo has a special status, and we owe a measure of respect to the embryo. But we also owe a measure of respect to the millions of people living with these devastating illnesses and the millions who have yet to show signs of them." □

Canada asked to recruit fewer South African doctors

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

South Africa's high commissioner to Canada has issued an unprecedented formal appeal to Canada's health ministers to stop recruiting doctors and other health professionals from South Africa.

In a letter to provincial and the federal health ministers, André Jaquet said that he was concerned that, given Canada's shortages of healthcare specialists and massive new healthcare funding announced by the fed-

eral government last September, recruiting efforts would increase among South Africa's doctors, nurses, radiologists, pharmacists, and other health workers. This could further undermine his country's ability to reform the poor health infrastructure inherited from its apartheid past.

Canada now has over 1500 South African doctors—17% of physicians in the province of Saskatchewan took their first medical degree there.

Dr Martin Vogel, the first physician trained in South Africa to head the province's medical association, is impatient with the idea that Canada is "poaching." "Being from Africa, I know what poaching is," he said. "There is the hunter and there is the hunted. If anything, I was hunting for a better life." And he considers he has found it.

The 260 Saskatchewan doctors who trained in South Africa make up the equivalent of five years' output from the province's medical school. The Canadian Medical Association's president, Peter Barrett, who practises in Saskatoon, said that provinces like his would be in desperate shape without foreign doctors. If

doctors are leaving a jurisdiction, "you have to ask why it's better where they're going."

In a telephone interview with the *BMJ*, Commissioner Jaquet said that Canada was not the only country recruiting South African doctors in large numbers; Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom had done so, and three years ago the United Kingdom reached an agreement with South Africa to deal with the problem.

"The whole point is not to try to limit peoples' freedom of movement," he said, "[but to] start a debate in the medical community on the ethical aspects of such aggressive medical recruiting." □